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A Legion of Names

Bill Heintzelman

"I just want to sit a minute," said Esther. "Goodness sakes! You act as if a body were trying to get out of going there."

"Well, ain't you?"

"I am not," she said, "And shame on you for thinking so, Roy Berg. It's just a slab of stone, that's all."

"Sure, it is," he said, "like the Mississippi's just a wide creek."

"Anyway, it's nothing fret about," she said as she settled against the benchback.

She was thinking how easy it was to be brave in the afternoon. But Esther wasn't sleeping nights anymore. She would lie very still in her bed, and go into the past. She remembered the slant of the Sun coming through the living room windows when the Marine officer came to tell them Mitch was dead. Rainbow colors from the glass prisms in their chandelier danced up the side of the walls. They flickered on his green wool uniform and on the black armband he wore. She could even hear the drone of his voice as he recited the message, pausing to read only when he spoke Mitch's name and rank. She had been brave that afternoon. The tears came later, in the dark. At night, she decided, memories gnawed away your daytime courage and left you small and terrified.

Esther thought the bad memories were behind her, until she won this trip, until Roy said he wanted to go to the wall and see if Mitch's name was there. Her sleep became troubled and fitful after that. And today, the heebie-jeebies fluttered to life as she rode here on the subway. The tension knots tightened her stomach and swelled her throat so that when she spoke, her words came out thick with phlegm. Esther wanted to cry, but she clenched her jaw, and rode staring out of the train window at nothing. She walked with Roy as far as the park bench and then insisted on sitting down.

"I suppose you think I'm acting like a silly old hen," she said.

"Nope," said Roy. "I think you're hurtin', and I think goin' over that hill is hateful to you because of the hurt. But, Es, our boy's name is there. It's about all we got left of him."

Esther stopped fanning herself and studied Roy, who stood, hands in his

pockets, watching a couple stroll over the hillcrest. After more than fifty years, he could still surprise her. Roy was quiet and steady, so always *there* that she found it easy to take him for granted. Esther had expected Roy to know she was mixed up and afraid, but it pleased her that he seemed to understand as well. His toe scuffed the grit on the sidewalk scattering a few tiny pebbles.

“I know you’d almost rather eat barbed wire than go there, but if you don’t go now, don’t go to see that his name is there, you’ll hate yourself later on,” he said. “I couldn’t stand that.”

“I’m just pooped out,” she said, “It’s so hot!”

Esther flipped the skirt of her dress, and the tiny breeze created by the moving cotton cooled her legs. She lifted her face to the sky holding her sun hat on with her left hand. The hat and dress were white with a flower print. She’d found them on the rack at the Ortonville Pamida Store while Roy was trying on the tan Dickies he wanted for the trip. The dress was her size, so they bought it, too. A white plastic Pamida bag sat on the ground by the bench.

“We should go now,” said Roy.

She stood up with a little difficulty. Roy moved beside her and put his arm around her. Esther leaned into him, and Roy applied just enough pressure to hug and reassure her. She patted his chest, and they started up the hill.

They climbed slowly because her legs were bad. She told everyone it was age, but Esther knew, deep down, she was carrying too much weight. She had been in farm kitchens all of her life, and loved making rich, heavy foods and cooking big meals for hard working men. But Roy had sold the farm a year ago. They were Ortonville “townies” now. Roy had adapted, but Esther admitted she was still cooking meals as if he were working outside 14 hours a day. They topped the hill and Roy pulled up short.

“I’ve seen it on TV and in magazines, but—,” Roy fumbled for words. “Would you look at that!” He was almost whispering.

Afternoon sunshine reflected off the wall’s polished surface. Esther stood by Roy, her hand almost saluting as she made it into a visor. The brightness hurt her eyes. She saw two or three wreath stands through the blur, a man in a wheel chair going slowly back and forth on the sidewalk in front of the wall, a dozen tourists taking pictures and walking up to the wall to put a hand on it, and

four children playing tag in the grass a short distance off. Esther's fingers tightened on the Pamida bag that she was crushing against her breast.

"It's awful," she said. "I hate it."

When Roy's right hand rubbed his cheek, Esther knew he was thinking. His hand was going up and down slowly now from chin point to ear lobe. His eyes were wide and moved across the scene, seeming to take in the wall, the people, and the dip in the ground where it was built. His judgement, when it came, was different from hers.

"I think I like it," he said. "Could be it's just the spot they got it in, but it's quiet here."

Esther's hand slid from his arm.

"Do you hear it, Es? The hush?"

She took off her sun hat. The whoosh of cars on the road and the whine of jets flying from National Airport were muted. There was a silence about this spot, a kind of sacred silence, she thought. Ethel brushed at a fly that buzzed in her hair.

"Well," she said, "maybe 'awful' was too strong. It seems a place to put things to rest. But I don't like it."

"You don't have to. It brings all the bad back," said Roy. "Remember how they gave us the flag on his coffin? I always thought we got the short end of that swap. Later, when we saw college kids burnin' the flag, it got personal. I hated 'em because it was like they was burning Mitch."

"You still miss him, don't you?"

"I don't know, Es. Lot of years have passed. There's an empty place in me. But it don't hurt the way it used to. I just got a hollow spot I'll never fill."

"Well, I miss him," said Esther. "And to come here like this just makes me think how much I miss him."

As they stood at the hilltop looking down, Esther saw a man in a brown uniform begin climbing toward them.

"Afternoon, folks," he said as he approached. "First visit?"

"Yes," said Roy.

"Looking for a special name?"

"Yes. My son," said Esther.

The policeman offered his hand to Roy. "I'm Gary Higman," he said, "Maybe I can help you."

As they walked down the hill, Esther thought Roy seemed to pull back into himself more than usual. He listened as the officer talked about the wall and how thousands of people came every month just to touch it. As they walked past the first wall, Roy stopped dead.

"So many names," he said. "How will we ever find him in all those names?"

"The register," said Higman, "we have all the names in alphabetical order there. All we do is look your son's name up, and the register will tell us where to look on the wall."

"How many names are there," asked Roy, "How many sons and daughters names are on that wall?"

"58,000," said Higman.

"Too many. Way too many," said Roy.

Clutching her Pamida bag, Esther followed Higman to the register. In short order they found Lance Corporal Mitchell Charles Berg, USMC. The officer directed her to the proper wall and column. Roy brought up the rear, walking slowly with his hands behind his back. She waited for him and thought Roy looked flushed as he approached.

"Are you all right," she asked.

"Just thinking," he said. "This thing really isn't about war. It's a reminder that those soldiers all had lives they wanted to come back to. They had names." Esther wasn't listening. She was standing at the correct wall now, looking up and down the correct column. "There!" she said. "There it is!"

"Where?"

"There, you old fool," she said. Esther stood by the wall, stretching her arm to her son's name, to touch it. "It's right here," she said softly. "Aww, Mitch!"

Esther rustled through the Pamida bag looking for her piece of trace paper and black crayon. She was moving fast to stay ahead of the surging pain. Roy, she knew, didn't understand her grief or its depth. Besides, he seemed suddenly preoccupied himself. There was something going through his mind, but

she didn't know what. And right now, she had other things to do.

Officer Higman braced her as she stepped close to the wall and held the paper over her son's name. She scribbled back and forth with the crayon, watching as the the letters formed in the slash of black, and stood out in relief. She lowered the paper and stood with Higman, running fingers slowly across the waxy crayon rubbing. She was half done. Esther had something to bring away from the wall. Now she fished in the bag again. There was something she wanted to leave. She pulled out the teddy bear.

They had named the bear Little Mitch. He was dark brown and tan, his fur matted in some places and worn off in others. Little Mitch was a veteran of boyhood, with a nose that was crushed flat, and a ragged hole where a plastic eye used to be. His remaining ear was held on by threads. He wore a Marine overseas cap that had the crossed-rifles and single chevron of a Lance-Corporal pinned to it. Little Mitch had at times been both an enemy soldier to punch silly and a pillow to sleep on and cuddle. He had gone through all the battles and all the wars, and, unlike his owner, he had survived. Now Esther held the bear in her shaking hands and placed it on the ground by the wall.

"I brought your bear, Mitch," she whispered, "I brought Little Mitch."

Esther turned to where Roy stood on the sidewalk, and felt the strength go from her legs. Roy's big hands were cupped over his mouth, his eyes bright and glassy, his shoulders sagged and rounded. Esther had never seen him cry. She went to him and they stood together, looking straight ahead, at the bear leaning at an angle against the wall.

Roy leaned against her. "I just couldn't—," he searched for words that wouldn't come. "Dear God in Heaven," he said, "I miss that boy. I think I miss them all."

"Say, that's quite a bear," said Higman. "Looks like he's had a full life."

Roy blew his nose, and Esther brightened. "He belonged to my son," she said. "We brought Little Mitch out here to leave."

"I can understand that," said Higman, "but, you know, I don't think I'd leave a bear this special at the wall."

"Why not?" asked Roy.

"Well, he'll be out here a few days at most, then the caretakers will pick

him up and he'll go to a warehouse across town. They'll put a tag on him and leave him on a shelf."

"We saw other people leaving stuff here on television. That's what give us the idea," said Roy.

"Fact is, we have to do something with everything that's left at the wall," said Higman. "We can't destroy it and we can't give it away. Last few years we've warehoused it. Before that, the things left behind got lost or ruined in the weather." Higman pointed to Little Mitch, "That fella looks like he could be more comfort to you folks back home. I know this, he'll comfort nobody collecting warehouse dust."

Esther snatched the bear from the ground and stuffed him back in the Pamida bag.

"Thank you," she said.

"My pleasure," said Higman, "Y'all have a nice day now, hear?"

Roy and Esther watched him walk off, and then turned back to the wall.

"You know," said Roy, "Kennedy is buried somewhere around here pretty close. I think I'd like to visit his grave. As long as we're here."

Esther looked all around and then at Roy. She smiled, squeezed his arm, and nodded. She didn't trust herself to talk. With Roy leading, they walked up the hill toward the Metro station.